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Aesthetics

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Aesthetics, also spelled esthetics, the philosophical study of beauty and taste. It is closely related to the philosophy of art, which is concerned with the nature of art and the concepts in terms of which individual works of art are interpreted and evaluated.

To provide more than a general definition of the subject matter of aesthetics is immensely difficult. Indeed, it could be said that self-definition has been the major task of modern aesthetics. We are acquainted with an interesting and puzzling realm of experience: the realm of the beautiful, the ugly, the sublime, and the elegant; of taste, criticism, and fine art; and of contemplation, sensuous enjoyment, and charm. In all these phenomena we believe that similar principles are operative and that similar interests are engaged. If we are mistaken in this impression, we will have to dismiss such ideas as beauty and taste as having only peripheral philosophical interest. Alternatively, if our impression is correct and philosophy corroborates it, we will have discovered the basis for a philosophical aesthetics.

This article seeks to clarify the nature of modern aesthetics and to delineate its underlying principles and concerns. Although the article focusses on Western aesthetic thought and its development, it surveys some of the seminal features of Marxist and Eastern aesthetics.

” A general definition of beauty and aesthetic excellence would be difficult, but fortunately there are a number of generally accepted principles that can be used to achieve an understanding of the aesthetic considerations in design. One must note, however, that such…

The nature and scope of aesthetics

Aesthetics is broader in scope than the philosophy of art, which comprises one of its branches. It deals not only with the nature and value of the arts but also with those responses to natural objects that find expression in the language of the beautiful and the ugly. A problem is encountered at the outset, however, for terms such as beautiful and ugly seem too vague in their application and too subjective in their meaning to divide the world successfully into those things that do, and those that do not, exemplify them. Almost anything might be seen as beautiful by someone or from some point of view; and different people apply the word to quite disparate objects for reasons that often seem to have little or nothing in common. It may be that there is some single underlying belief that motivates all of their judgments. It may also be, however, that the term beautiful has no sense except as the expression of an attitude, which is in turn attached by different people to quite different states of affairs.

Moreover, in spite of the emphasis laid by philosophers on the terms beautiful and ugly, it is far from evident that they are the most important or most useful either in the discussion and criticism of art or in the description of that which appeals to us in nature. To convey what is significant in a poem, we might describe it as ironic, moving, expressive, balanced, and harmonious. Likewise, in characterizing a favourite stretch of countryside, we may prefer to describe it as peaceful, soft, atmospheric, harsh, and evocative, rather than beautiful. The least that should be said is that beautiful belongs to a class of terms from which it has been chosen as much for convenience’ sake as for any sense that it captures what is distinctive of the class.

At the same time, there seems to be no clear way of delimiting the class in question—not at least in advance of theory. Aesthetics must therefore cast its net more widely than the study either of beauty or of other aesthetic concepts if it is to discover the principles whereby it is to be defined. We are at once returned, therefore, to the vexing question of our subject matter: What should a philosopher study in order to understand such ideas as beauty and taste?

Three approaches to aesthetics

Three broad approaches have been proposed in answer to that question, each intuitively reasonable:

1. The study of the aesthetic concepts, or, more specifically, the analysis of the “language of criticism,” in which particular judgments are singled out and their logic and justification displayed. In his famous treatise On the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), Edmund Burke attempted to draw a distinction between two aesthetic

concepts, and, by studying the qualities that they denoted, to analyze the separate human attitudes that are directed toward them. Burke's distinction between the sublime and the beautiful was extremely influential, reflecting as it did the prevailing style of contemporary criticism. In more recent times, philosophers have tended to concentrate on the concepts of modern literary theory—namely, those such as representation, expression, form, style, and sentimentality. The study invariably has a dual purpose: to show how (if at all) these descriptions might be justified, and to show what is distinctive in the human experiences that are expressed in them.

2. A philosophical study of certain states of mind—responses, attitudes, emotions—that are held to be involved in aesthetic experience. Thus, in the seminal work of modern aesthetics Kritik der Urteilskraft (1790; The Critique of Judgment), Immanuel Kant located the distinctive features of the aesthetic in the faculty of "judgment," whereby we take up a certain stance toward objects, separating them from our scientific interests and our practical concerns. The key to the aesthetic realm lies therefore in a certain "disinterested" attitude, which we may assume toward any object and which can be expressed in many contrasting ways.

More recently, philosophers—distrustful of Kant's theory of the faculties—have tried to express the notions of an "aesthetic attitude" and "aesthetic experience" in other ways, relying upon developments in philosophical psychology that owe much to G.W.F. Hegel, the Phenomenologists, and Ludwig Wittgenstein (more precisely, the Wittgenstein of the Philosophical Investigations [1953]). In considering these theories (some of which are discussed below) a crucial distinction must be borne in mind: that between philosophy of mind and empirical psychology. Philosophy is not a science, because it does not investigate the causes of phenomena. It is an a priori or conceptual investigation, the underlying concern of which is to identify rather than to explain. In effect, the aim of the philosopher is to give the broadest possible description of the things themselves, so as to show how we must understand them and how we ought to value them. The two most prominent current philosophical methods—Phenomenology and conceptual analysis—tend to regard this aim as distinct from, and (at least in part) prior to, the aim of science. For how can we begin to explain what we have yet to identify? While there have been empirical studies of aesthetic experience (exercises in the psychology of beauty), these form no part of aesthetics as considered in this article. Indeed, the remarkable paucity of their conclusions may reasonably be attributed to their attempt to provide a theory of phenomena that have yet to be properly defined.

3. The philosophical study of the aesthetic object. This approach reflects the view that the problems of aesthetics exist primarily because the world contains a special class of objects toward which we react selectively and which we describe in aesthetic terms. The usual class singled out as prime aesthetic objects is that comprising works of art. All other aesthetic objects (landscapes, faces, objets trouvés, and the like) tend to be included in this class only because, and to the extent that, they can be seen as art (or so it is claimed).

If we adopt such an approach, then there ceases to be a real distinction between aesthetics and the philosophy of art; and aesthetic concepts and aesthetic experience deserve their names through being, respectively, the concepts required in understanding works of art and the experience provoked by confronting them. Thus Hegel, perhaps the major philosophical influence on modern aesthetics, considered the main task of aesthetics to reside in the study of the various forms of art and of the spiritual content peculiar to each. Much of recent aesthetics has been similarly focussed on artistic problems, and it could be said that it is now orthodox to consider aesthetics entirely through the study of art.

The third approach to aesthetics does not require this concentration upon art. Even someone who considered art to be no more than one manifestation of aesthetic value—perhaps even a comparatively insignificant manifestation—may believe that the first concern of aesthetics is to study the objects of aesthetic experience and to find in them the true distinguishing features of the aesthetic realm. Unless we restrict the domain of aesthetic objects, however, it becomes extremely difficult to maintain that they have anything significant in common beyond the fact of inspiring a similar interest. This means that we should be compelled to adopt the second approach to aesthetics after all. And there seems no more plausible way of restricting the domain of aesthetic objects than through the concept of art.

The three approaches may lead to incompatible results. Alternatively, they may be in harmony. Once again, it can only be at the end point of our philosophy that we shall be able to decide. Initially, it must be assumed that the three approaches may differ substantially, or merely in emphasis, and thus that each question in aesthetics has a tripartite form.

The aesthetic object

The third approach to aesthetics begins with a class of aesthetic objects and attempts thereafter to show the significance of that class to those who selectively respond to it. The term aesthetic object, however, is ambiguous, and, depending on its interpretation, may suggest two separate programs of philosophical aesthetics. The expression may denote either the "intentional" or the "material" object of aesthetic experience. This distinction, a legacy of the Scholastic philosophers of the Middle Ages, has played a major role in recent Phenomenology. It may be briefly characterized as follows: When someone responds to object O, his response depends upon a conception of O that may, in fact, be erroneous. O is then the material object of his response, while his conception defines the intentional object. (The term intentional comes from the Latin intendere, "to aim.") To cite an example: A person is frightened by a white cloth flapping in a darkened hall, taking it for a ghost. Here, the material object of the fear is the cloth, while the intentional object is a ghost. A philosophical discussion of fear may be presented as a discussion of things feared, but if so, the phrase denotes the class of intentional objects of fear and not the (infinitely varied and infinitely disordered) class of material objects. In an important sense, the intentional object is part of a state of mind, whereas the material object always has independent (and objective) existence. If the expression "aesthetic object" is, therefore, taken in its intentional construction, the study of the aesthetic object becomes the study, not of an independently existing class of things, but of the aesthetic experience itself. It is in this sense that the term occurs in the writings of Phenomenologists (e.g., Mikel Dufrenne, La Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique [1953; The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience] and Roman Ingarden, Das literarische Kunstwerk [1931; The Literary Work of Art]), whose studies of the aesthetic object exemplify not the third, but the second, of the approaches considered above.

Which of those two approaches should be adopted? We can already see one reason for adopting the approach that puts the aesthetic experience first and examines the aesthetic object primarily as the intentional object of that experience. It is, after all, to experience that we must turn if we are to understand the value of the aesthetic realm—our reason for engaging with it, studying it, and adding to it. Until we understand that value, we will not know why we ought to construct such a concept as the aesthetic, still less why we should erect a whole branch of philosophy devoted to its study.

A further reason also suggests itself for rejecting the approach to aesthetics that sees it merely as the philosophy of art, because art, and the institutions that sustain it, are mutable and perhaps inessential features of the human condition. While we classify together such separate art forms as poetry, the novel, music, drama, painting, sculpture, and architecture, our disposition to do so is as much the consequence of philosophical theory as its premise. Would other people at other times and in other conditions have countenanced such a classification or seen its point? And if so, would they have been motivated by similar purposes, similar observations, and similar beliefs? We might reasonably be skeptical, for while there have been many attempts to find something in common—if only a "family resemblance"—between the various currently accepted art forms, they have all been both contentious in themselves and of little aesthetic interest. Considered materially (i.e., without reference to the experiences that we direct to them), the arts seem to have little in common except for those properties that are either too uninteresting to deserve philosophical scrutiny (the property, for example, of being artifacts) or else too vast and vague to be independently intelligible.

Consider the theory of Clive Bell (Art, 1914) that art is distinguished by its character as "significant form." Initially attractive, the suggestion crumbles at once before the skeptic. When is form "significant"? The only answer to be extracted from Bell is this: "when it is art." In effect, the theory reduces to a tautology. In any normal understanding of the words, a traffic warden is a significant form, at least to the motorist who sees himself about to receive a ticket. Thus, to explain Bell's meaning, it is necessary to restrict the term significant to the significance (whatever that is) of art.

Moreover, it is of the greatest philosophical importance to attend not only to the resemblances between the art forms but also to their differences. It is true that almost anything can be seen from some point of view as beautiful. At the same time, however, our experience of beauty crucially depends upon a knowledge of the object in which beauty is seen. It is absurd to suppose that I could present you with an object that might be a stone, a sculpture, a box, a fruit, or an animal, and expect you to tell me whether it is beautiful before knowing what it is. In general we may say—in opposition to a certain tradition in aesthetics that finds expression in Kant's theory—that our sense of beauty is always dependent upon a conception of the object

in the way that our sense of the beauty of the human figure is dependent upon a conception of that figure. Features that we should regard as beautiful in a horse—developed haunches, curved back, and so on—we should regard as ugly in a human being, and those aesthetic judgments would be determined by our conception of what humans and horses generally are, how they move, and what they achieve through their movements. In a similar way, features that are beautiful in a sculpture may not be beautiful in a work of architecture, where an idea of function seems to govern our perceptions. In every case, our perception of the beauty of a work of art requires us to be aware of the distinctive character of each art form and to put out of mind, as largely irrelevant to our concerns, the overarching category of art to which all supposedly belong. But if that is so, it is difficult to see how we could cast light upon the realm of aesthetic interest by studying the concept of art.

Whether or not that concept is a recent invention, it is certainly a recent obsession. Medieval and Renaissance philosophers who approached the problems of beauty and taste—e.g., St. Thomas Aquinas, Peter Abelard, and even Leon Battista Alberti—often wrote of beauty without reference to art, taking as their principal example the human face and body. The distinctively modern approach to aesthetics began to take shape during the 18th century, with the writings on art of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles Batteux, and Johann Winckelmann and the theories of taste proposed by the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, Lord Kames (Henry Home), and Archibald Alison. This approach materialized not only because of a growing interest in fine art as a uniquely human phenomenon but also because of the awakening of feelings toward nature, which marked the dawn of the Romantic movement. In Kant's aesthetics, indeed, nature has pride of place as offering the only examples of what he calls "free beauty"—i.e., beauty that can be appreciated without the intermediary of any polluting concept. Art, for Kant, was not merely one among many objects of aesthetic interest; it was also fatally flawed in its dependence upon intellectual understanding.

Even without taking that extreme position, it is difficult to accept that the fragile and historically determined concept of art can bear the weight of a full aesthetic theory. Leaving aside the case of natural beauty, we must still recognize the existence of a host of human activities (dress, decoration, manners, ornament) in which taste is of the essence and yet which seems totally removed from the world of fine art. It has been common, following the lead of Batteux, to make a distinction between the fine and the useful arts, and to accommodate the activities just referred to under the latter description; but it is clear that this is no more than a gesture and that the points of similarity between the art of the dressmaker and that of the composer are of significance only because of a similarity in the interests that these arts are meant to satisfy.

The aesthetic recipient

Whichever approach we take, however, there is an all-important question upon the answer to which the course of aesthetics depends: the question of the recipient. Only beings of a certain kind have aesthetic interests and aesthetic experience, produce and appreciate art, employ such concepts as those of beauty, expression, and form. What is it that gives these beings access to this realm? The question is at least as old as Plato but received its most important modern exposition in the philosophy of Kant, who argued, first, that it is only rational beings who can exercise judgment—the faculty of aesthetic interest—and, second, that until exercised in aesthetic judgment rationality is incomplete. It is worth pausing to examine these two claims.

Rational beings are those, like us, whose thought and conduct are guided by reason; who deliberate about what to believe and what to do; and who affect each other's beliefs and actions through argument and persuasion. Kant argued that reason has both a theoretical and a practical employment, and that a rational being finds both his conduct and his thought inspired and limited by reason. The guiding law of rational conduct is that of morality, enshrined in the categorical imperative, which enjoins us to act only on that maxim which we can at the same time will as a universal law.

By virtue of practical reason, the rational being sees himself and others of his kind as subject to an order that is not that of nature: he lives responsive to the law of reason and sees himself as a potential member of a "kingdom of ends" wherein the demands of reason are satisfied. Moreover, he looks on every rational being—himself included—as made sacrosanct by reason and by the morality that stems from it. The rational being, he recognizes, must be treated always as an end in himself, as something of intrinsic value, and never as a mere object to be disposed of according to purposes that are not its own.

The capacity to see things as intrinsically valuable, irreplaceable, or ends in themselves is one of the important gifts of reason. But it is not exercised only practically or only in our dealings with other reasoning beings. It may also be exercised contemplatively toward nature as a whole. In this case, practical considerations are held in abeyance, and we stand back from nature and look on it with a disinterested concern. Such an attitude is not only peculiar to rational beings but also necessary to them. Without it, they have only an impoverished grasp of their own significance and of their relation to the world in which they are situated through their thoughts and actions. This disinterested contemplation and the experiences that arise from it acquaint us, according to Kant, with the ultimate harmony that exists between the world and our faculties. They therefore provide the guarantee, both of practical reasoning and of the understanding, by intimating to us directly that the world answers to our purposes and corresponds to our beliefs.

Disinterested contemplation forms, for Kant, the core of aesthetic experience and the ground of the judgment of beauty. He thus concludes (1) that only rational beings have aesthetic experience; (2) that every rational being needs aesthetic experience and is significantly incomplete without it; and (3) that aesthetic experience stands in fundamental proximity to moral judgment and is integral to our nature as moral beings.

Modern philosophers have sometimes followed Kant, sometimes ignored him. Rarely, however, have they set out to show that aesthetic experience is more widely distributed than the human race. For what could it mean to say of a cow, for example, that in staring at a landscape it is moved by the sentiment of beauty? What in a cow's behaviour or mental composition could manifest such a feeling? While a cow may be uninterested, it cannot surely be disinterested, in the manner of a rational being for whom disinterest is the most passionate form of interest. It is in pondering such considerations that one comes to realize just how deeply embedded in human nature is the aesthetic impulse, and how impossible it is to separate this impulse from the complex mental life that distinguishes human beings from beasts. This condition must be borne in mind by any philosopher seeking to confront the all-important question of the relation between the aesthetic and the moral.

The aesthetic experience

Such considerations point toward the aforementioned approach that begins with the aesthetic experience as the most likely to capture the full range of aesthetic phenomena without begging the important philosophical questions about their nature. Can we then single out a faculty, an attitude, a mode of judgment, or a form of experience that is distinctively aesthetic? And if so, can we attribute to it the significance that would make this philosophical enterprise both important in itself and relevant to the many questions posed by beauty, criticism, and art?

Taking their cue from Kant, many philosophers have defended the idea of an aesthetic attitude as one divorced from practical concerns, a kind of "distancing," or standing back, as it were, from ordinary involvement. The classic statement of this position is Edward Bullough's "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle," an essay published in the British Journal of Psychology in 1912. While there is certainly something of interest to be said along those lines, it cannot be the whole story. Just what kind of distance is envisaged? Is the lover distanced from his beloved? If not, by what right does he call her beautiful? Does distance imply a lack of practical involvement? If such is the case, how can we ever take up an aesthetic attitude to those things that have a purpose for us—things such as a dress, building, or decoration? But if these are not aesthetic, have we not paid a rather high price for our definition of this word—the price of detaching it from the phenomena that it was designed to identify?

Kant's own formulation was more satisfactory. He described the recipient of aesthetic experience not as distanced but as disinterested, meaning that the recipient does not treat the object of enjoyment either as a vehicle for curiosity or as a means to an end. He contemplates the object as it is in itself and "apart from all interest." In a similar spirit, Arthur Schopenhauer argued that a person could regard anything aesthetically so long as he regarded it in independence of his will—that is, irrespective of any use to which he might put it. Regarding it thus, a person could come to see the Idea that the object expressed, and in this knowledge consists aesthetic appreciation (Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung [1819; The World as Will and Idea]).

Of a piece with such a view is the popular theory of art as a kind of "play" activity, in which creation and appreciation are divorced from the normal urgencies of existence and surrendered to leisure. "With the agreeable, the good, the perfect," wrote Friedrich Schiller, "man is merely in earnest, but with beauty he

plays" (Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen [1794–95; Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man]).

Such thoughts have already been encountered. The problem is to give them philosophical precision. They have recurred in modern philosophy in a variety of forms—for example, in the theory that the aesthetic object is always considered for its own sake, or as a unique individual rather than a member of a class. Those particular formulations have caused some philosophers to treat aesthetic objects as though they were endowed with a peculiar metaphysical status. Alternatively, it is sometimes argued that the aesthetic experience has an intuitive character, as opposed to the conceptual character of scientific thought or the instrumental character of practical understanding.

The simplest way of summarizing this approach to aesthetics is in terms of two fundamental propositions:

1. The aesthetic object is an object of sensory experience and enjoyed as such: it is heard, seen, or (in the limiting case) imagined in sensory form.
2. The aesthetic object is at the same time contemplated: its appearance is a matter of intrinsic interest and studied not merely as an object of sensory pleasure but also as the repository of significance and value.

The first of these propositions explains the word aesthetic, which was initially used in this connection by the Leibnizian philosopher Alexander Baumgarten in Meditationes Philosophicae de Nonnullis ad Poema Pertinentibus (1735; Reflections on Poetry). Baumgarten borrowed the Greek term for sensory perception (aisthēsis) in order to denote a realm of concrete knowledge (the realm, as he saw it, of poetry), in which a content is communicated in sensory form. The second proposition is, in essence, the foundation of taste. It describes the motive of our attempt to discriminate rationally between those objects that are worthy of contemplative attention and those that are not.

Almost all of the aesthetic theories of post-Kantian Idealism depend upon those two propositions and try to explain the peculiarities of aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgment in terms of the synthesis of the sensory and the intellectual that they imply—the synthesis summarized in Hegel's theory of art as "the sensuous embodiment of the Idea." Neither proposition is particularly clear. Throughout the discussions of Kant and his immediate following, the "sensory" is assimilated to the "concrete," the "individual," the "particular," and the "determinate," while the "intellectual" is assimilated to the "abstract," the "universal," the "general," and the "indeterminate"—assimilations that would nowadays be regarded with extreme suspicion. Nevertheless, subsequent theories have repeatedly returned to the idea that aesthetic experience involves a special synthesis of intellectual and sensory components, and that both its peculiarities and its value are to be derived from such a synthesis.

The idea at once gives rise to paradoxes. The most important was noticed by Kant, who called it the antinomy of taste. As an exercise of reason, he argued, aesthetic experience must inevitably tend toward a reasoned choice and therefore must formulate itself as a judgment. Aesthetic judgment, however, seems to be in conflict with itself. It cannot be at the same time aesthetic (an expression of sensory enjoyment) and also a judgment (claiming universal assent). Yet all rational beings, by virtue of their rationality, seem disposed to make these judgments. On the one hand, they feel pleasure in some object, and this pleasure is immediate, not based, according to Kant, in any conceptualization or in any inquiry into cause, purpose, or constitution. On the other hand, they express their pleasure in the form of a judgment, speaking "as if beauty were a quality of the object," and so representing their pleasure as objectively valid. But how can this be so? The pleasure is immediate, based in no reasoning or analysis. So what permits this demand for universal agreement?

However we approach the idea of beauty, we find this paradox emerging. Our ideas, feelings, and judgments are called aesthetic precisely because of their direct relation to sensory enjoyment. Hence, no one can judge the beauty of an object that he has never encountered. Scientific judgments, like practical principles, can be received "second hand." I can, for example, take you as my authority for the truths of physics or for the utility of railways. But I cannot take you as my authority for the merits of Leonardo or Mozart if I have not seen or heard works by either artist. It would seem to follow from this that there can be no rules or principles of aesthetic judgment, since I must feel the pleasure immediately in the perception of the object and cannot be talked into it by any grounds of proof. It is always experience, and never conceptual thought, that gives the right to aesthetic judgment, so that anything that alters the experience of an object alters its aesthetic significance as well. As Kant put it, aesthetic judgment is "free from concepts," and beauty itself is not a concept.

Such a conclusion, however, seems to be inconsistent with the fact that aesthetic judgment is a form of judgment. When I describe something as beautiful, I do not mean merely that it pleases me: I am speaking about it, not about myself, and, if challenged, I try to find reasons for my view. I do not explain my feeling but give grounds for it by pointing to features of its object. Any search for reasons has the "universalizing" character of rationality: I am in effect saying that others, insofar as they are rational, ought to feel exactly the same delight as I feel. Being disinterested, I have put aside my interests, and with them everything that makes my judgment relative to me. But, if that is so, then "the judgment of taste is based on concepts, for otherwise there could be no room even for contention in the matter, or for the claim to the necessary agreement of others."

In short, the expression aesthetic judgment seems to be a contradiction in terms, denying in the first term precisely that reference to rational considerations that it affirms in the second. This paradox, which we have expressed in Kant's language, is not peculiar to the philosophy of Kant. On the contrary, it is encountered in one form or another by every philosopher or critic who takes aesthetic experience seriously, and who therefore recognizes the tension between the sensory and the intellectual constraints upon it. On the one hand, aesthetic experience is rooted in the immediate sensory enjoyment of its object through an act of perception. On the other, it seems to reach beyond enjoyment toward a meaning that is addressed to our reasoning powers and that seeks judgment from them. Thus criticism, the reasoned justification of aesthetic judgment, is an inevitable upshot of aesthetic experience. Yet, critical reasons can never be merely intellectual; they always contain a reference to the way in which an object is perceived.

Relationship between form and content

Two related paradoxes also emerge from the same basic conception of the aesthetic experience. The first was given extended consideration by Hegel, who argued, in his Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik (1832; "Lectures on Aesthetics"; Eng. trans., Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art), roughly as follows: Our sensuous appreciation of art concentrates upon the given "appearance"—the "form." It is this that holds our attention and that gives to the work of art its peculiar individuality. Because it addresses itself to our sensory appreciation, the work of art is essentially concrete, to be understood by an act of perception rather than by a process of discursive thought. At the same time, our understanding of the work of art is in part intellectual; we seek in it a conceptual content, which it presents to us in the form of an idea. One purpose of critical interpretation is to expound this idea in discursive form—to give the equivalent of the content of the work of art in another, nonsensuous idiom. But criticism can never succeed in this task, for, by separating the content from the particular form, it abolishes its individuality. The content presented then ceases to be the exact content of that work of art. In losing its individuality, the content loses its aesthetic reality; it thus ceases to be a reason for attending to the particular work of art that first attracted our critical attention. It cannot be this that we saw in the original work and that explained its power over us. For this content, displayed in the discursive idiom of the critical intellect, is no more than a husk, a discarded relic of a meaning that eluded us in the act of seizing it. If the content is to be the true object of aesthetic interest, it must remain wedded to its individuality: it cannot be detached from its "sensuous embodiment" without being detached from itself. Content is, therefore, inseparable from form and form in turn inseparable from content. (It is the form that it is only by virtue of the content that it embodies.)

Hegel's argument is the archetype of many, all aimed at showing that it is both necessary to distinguish form from content and also impossible to do so. This paradox may be resolved by rejecting either of its premises, but, as with Kant's antinomy, neither premise seems dispensable. To suppose that content and form are inseparable is, in effect, to dismiss both ideas as illusory, since no two works of art can then share either a content or a form—the form being definitive of each work's individuality. In this case, no one could ever justify his interest in a work of art by reference to its meaning. The intensity of aesthetic interest becomes a puzzling, and ultimately inexplicable, feature of our mental life. If, on the other hand, we insist that content and form are separable, we shall never be able to find, through a study of content, the reason for attending to the particular work of art that intrigues us. Every work of art stands proxy for its paraphrase. An impassable gap then opens between aesthetic experience and its ground, and the claim that aesthetic experience is intrinsically valuable is thrown in doubt.

A related paradox is sometimes referred to as the "heresy of paraphrase," the words being those of the U.S. literary critic Cleanth Brooks (The Well Wrought Urn, 1949). The heresy is that of assuming that the meaning

of a work of art (particularly of poetry) can be paraphrased. According to Brooks, who here followed an argument of Benedetto Croce, the meaning of a poem consists precisely in what is not translatable. Poetic meaning is bound up with the particular disposition of the words—their sound, rhythm, and arrangement—in short, with the "sensory embodiment" provided by the poem itself. To alter that embodiment is to produce either another poem (and therefore another meaning) or something that is not a work of art at all, and which therefore lacks completely the kind of meaning for which works of art are valued. Hence no poetry is translatable, and no critic can do better than to point to the objective features of the poem that most seem to him to be worthy of attention. Yet, that result too is paradoxical. For what does the critic see in those objective features and how is his recommendation to be supported? Why should we attend to poetry at all if nothing can be said about its virtues save only "look!"? Why look at a poem rather than an advertisement, a mirror, or a blade of grass? Everything becomes equally worthy of attention, since nothing can be said that will justify attention to anything.

The role of imagination

Such paradoxes suggest the need for a more extensive theory of the mind than has been so far assumed. We have referred somewhat loosely to the sensory and intellectual components of human experience but have said little about the possible relations and dependencies that exist between them. Perhaps, therefore, the paradoxes result only from our impoverished description of the human mind and are not intrinsic to the subject matter of aesthetic interest.

Many modern philosophers have at this point felt the need to invoke imagination, either as a distinct mental "faculty" (Kant) or as a distinctive mental operation by virtue of which thought and experience may be united. For Empiricist philosophers (such as David Hume, Joseph Addison, Archibald Alison, and Lord Kames), imagination involves a kind of "associative" process, whereby experiences evoke ideas, and so become united with them. For Kant and Hegel, imagination is not associative but constitutive—part of the nature of the experience that expresses it.

Once again it is useful to begin from Kant, who distinguished two uses of the imagination: the first in ordinary thought and perception, the second in aesthetic experience. When I look before me and see a book, my experience, according to Kant, embodies a "synthesis." It contains two elements: the "intuition" presented to the senses and the "concept" ("book"), contributed by the understanding. The two elements are synthesized by an act of the imagination that constitutes them as a single experience—the experience of seeing a book. Here imagination remains bound by the concepts of the understanding, which is to say that how I see the world depends upon my disposition to form determinate beliefs about it—in this case, the belief that there is a book before me. In aesthetic experience, however, imagination is free from concepts and engages in a kind of free play. This free play of the imagination enables me to bring concepts to bear on an experience that is, in itself, free from concepts. Thus there are two separate ways in which the content of experience is provided: one in ordinary perception, the other in aesthetic experience. In both cases the operative factor, in holding thought and sensation together, is the imagination.

Whether such theories can cast light on the mysterious unity between the intellectual and the sensory that we observe in aesthetic experience remains doubtful. The argument for saying that there is a single process of imagination involved in all perception, imagery, and remembering seems to consist only in the premise (undoubtedly true) that in these mental processes thought and experience are often inseparable. But to suppose therefore that there is some one "faculty" involved in forging the connection between them is to fail to take seriously the fact that they are inseparable.

Nevertheless, even if we find this general invocation of imagination, as the "synthesizing force" within perception, vacuous or unilluminating, we may yet feel that the imagination has some special role to play in aesthetic experience and that the reference to imagination has some special value in explaining the precise way in which a content and an experience become "fused" (to use George Santayana's term). Whether or not Kant was right to refer to a free play of imagination in aesthetic experience, there certainly seems to be a peculiarly creative imagination that human beings may exercise and upon which aesthetic experience calls. It is an exercise of creative imagination to see a face in a picture, since that involves seeing in defiance of judgment—seeing what one knows not to be there. It is not in the same sense an imaginative act to see a face in something that one also judges to be a face. This creative capacity is what Jean-Paul Sartre is referring to in L'Imaginaire: Psychologie phénoménologique de l'ima-gination (1940; "The Imaginary: The

Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination"; Eng. trans., The Psychology of Imagination) when he describes imagining as "the positing of an object as a nothingness"—as not being. In memory and perception we take our experience "for real." In imagination we contribute a content that has no reality beyond our disposition to "see" it, and it is clear that this added content is frequently summoned by art when, for example, we see the face in a picture or hear the emotion in a piece of music.

Recent work in aesthetics, to some extent inspired by the seminal writings of Sartre and Wittgenstein, has devoted considerable attention to the study of creative imagination. The hope has been to provide the extra ingredient in aesthetic experience that bridges the gap between the sensory and the intellectual and at the same time shows the relation between aesthetic experience and the experience of everyday life—an enterprise that is in turn of the first importance for any study that seeks to describe the moral significance of beauty.

Consider, for example, the spectator at Shakespeare's King Lear. He sees before him an actor who, by speaking certain lines and making certain gestures, earns his bread. But that is not all that he sees. He also sees a hoary king, cast down by age, pride, and weakness, who rages against the depravity of humankind. Yet the spectator knows that, in a crucial sense, there is no such king before him. It is intellectual understanding, not psychical distance, that prevents him from stepping onto the stage to offer his assistance. He knows that the scene he enjoys is one that he invents, albeit under the overwhelming compulsion induced by the actor and his lines. The spectator is being shown something that is outside the normal commerce of theoretical and practical understanding, and he is responding to a scene that bears no spatial, temporal, or causal relation to his own experience. His response is quintessentially aesthetic. For what interest could he have in this scene other than an interest in it for its own sake, for what it is in itself? At the same time, what it is in itself involves what it shows in general. In imaginatively conjuring this scene the spectator draws upon a wealth of experience, which is brought to mind and, as it were, condensed for him into the imaginative perception of the play. (Hence, Aristotle believed poetry is more general than history, since its concreteness is not that of real events, but rather of imaginary episodes constructed so as to typify human destiny in exemplary form.)

Such an exercise of the imagination clearly has much to tell us about the nature of aesthetic experience. Whether or not it could found a theory of the "missing link" between sensory enjoyment and intellectual understanding, it at least provides a paradigm of the relation between aesthetic experience and the experience of everyday life. The former is an imaginative reconstruction of the latter, which becomes interesting for its own sake precisely because—however realistic—it is not real.

Emotion, response, and enjoyment

It is natural to suppose that a spectator's response to King Lear is at least in part emotional, and that emotion plays a crucial role both in the enjoyment of art and in establishing the value of art. Moreover, it is not only art that stirs our emotions in the act of aesthetic attention: the same is or may be true of natural beauty, whether that of a face or of a landscape. These things hold our attention partly because they address themselves to our feelings and call forth a response which we value both for itself and for the consolation that we may attain through it. Thus we find an important philosophical tradition according to which the distinctive character of aesthetic experience is to be found in distinctively "aesthetic" emotions.

This tradition has ancient origins. Plato banished the poets from his ideal republic partly because of their capacity to arouse futile and destructive emotions, and in his answer to Plato, Aristotle argued that poetry, in particular tragic poetry, was valuable precisely because of its emotional effect. This idea enabled Aristotle to pose one of the most puzzling problems in aesthetics—the problem of tragedy—and to offer a solution. How can I willingly offer myself to witness scenes of terror and destruction? And how can I be said to enjoy the result, set store by it, or accord to it a positive value? Aristotle's answer is brief. He explains that by evoking pity and fear a tragedy also "purges" those emotions, and that is what we enjoy and value:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.

Aristotle implies that this purgation (katharsis) is not unpleasant to us precisely because the fictional and formalized nature of the action sets it at a distance from us. We can allow ourselves to feel what we normally shun to feel precisely because no one is really threatened (or at least no one real is threatened).

Attractive though that explanation may seem, it immediately encounters a serious philosophical problem. It is a plausible tenet of philosophical psychology that emotions are founded on beliefs: fear on the belief that one is threatened, pity on the belief that someone is miserable, jealousy on the belief that one has a rival, and so forth. In the nature of things, however, these beliefs do not exist in the theatre. Confronted by fiction, I am relieved precisely of the pressure of belief, and it is this condition that permits the Aristotelian katharsis. How, then, can I be said to experience pity and fear when the beliefs requisite to those very emotions are not present? More generally, how can my responses to the fictions presented by works of art share the structure of my everyday emotions, and how can they impart to those emotions a new meaning, force, or resolution?

Various answers have been proposed to that question. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, argued that our response to drama is characterized by a "willing suspension of disbelief," and thus involves the very same ingredient of belief that is essential to everyday emotion (Biographia Literaria, 1817). Coleridge's phrase, however, is consciously paradoxical. Belief is characterized precisely by the fact that it lies outside the will: I can command you to imagine something but not to believe it. For this reason, a suspension of disbelief that is achieved "willingly" is at best a highly dubious example of belief. In fact, the description seems to imply, not belief, but rather imagination, thus returning us to our problem of the relation between emotions directed to reality and those directed to merely imaginary scenes.

This is part of a much larger problem—namely, that of the relation between aesthetic and everyday experience. Two extreme positions serve to illustrate this problem. According to one, art and nature appeal primarily to our emotions: they awaken within us feelings of sympathy, or emotional associations, which are both pleasant in themselves and also instructive. We are made familiar with emotional possibilities, and, through this imaginative exercise, our responses to the world become illuminated and refined. This view, which provides an immediate and satisfying theory of the value of aesthetic experience, has been espoused in some form or other by many of the classical British Empiricists (Shaftesbury, Hume, Addison, Lord Kames, Alison, and Burke, to cite only a few). It is also related to the critical theories of writers such as Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, and F.R. Leavis, whose criticism would make little or no sense without the supposition that works of art have the power to correct and corrupt our emotions.

According to the opposite view, aesthetic interest, because it focusses on an object for its own sake, can involve no interest in "affect." To be interested in a work of art for the sake of emotion is to be interested in it as a means and, therefore, not aesthetically. In other words, true aesthetic interest is autonomous, standing outside the current of ordinary human feeling—an attitude of pure contemplation or pure "intuition" that isolates its object from the stream of common events and perceives it in its uniqueness, detached, unexplained, and inexplicable. This position has been taken in modern times by Benedetto Croce and, following him, by R.G. Collingwood, whose resolute defense of the autonomy of aesthetic experience was also associated with a theory of the autonomy of art. Art is not only seen as an end in itself but it is an end in itself, in a profound and significant sense that distinguishes art from all its false substitutes (and, in particular, from craft, which for Collingwood is not an end but merely a means).

Between those two poles, a variety of intermediate positions might be adopted. It is clear, in any case, that many questions have been begged by both sides. The aesthetic of sympathy, as Croce called it, has enormous difficulties in describing the emotions that are awakened in aesthetic experience, particularly the emotions that we are supposed to feel in response to such abstract arts as music. With what am I sympathizing when I listen to a string quartet or a symphony? What emotion do I feel? Moreover, the position encounters all the difficulties already noted in forging a link between the imaginary and the real.

The aesthetic of autonomy, as we may call it, encounters complementary difficulties and, in particular, the difficulty of showing why we should value either aesthetic experience itself or the art that is its characteristic object. Moreover, it assumes that whenever I take an emotional interest in something, I am interested in it for the sake of emotion, a false inference that would imply equally that the lover is interested only in his love or the angry person only in his anger. Collingwood thus dismisses "amusement art," on the spurious ground that to be interested in a work of art for the sake of amusement is to be interested not in the work but only in the amusement that it inspires. That is to say, it is to treat the work as a means to feeling rather than as an end in itself. Such a conclusion is entirely unwarranted. Amusement is, in fact, a species of interest in something for its own sake: I laugh not for the sake of laughter, but for the sake of the joke. While I may be interested in an object for the sake of the emotion that it arouses, the case is peculiar—the case, in fact, of

sentimentality, often dismissed by moralists as a spiritual corruption and equally by critics as a corruption of the aims of art.

The difficulties for both views are brought out by a fundamental aesthetic category: that of enjoyment. Whatever the ultimate value of aesthetic experience, we pursue it in the first instance for enjoyment's sake. Aesthetic experience includes, as its central instance, a certain kind of pleasure. But what kind of pleasure? While our emotions and sympathies are sometimes pleasurable, this is by no means their essential feature; they may equally be painful or neutral. How then does the aesthetic of sympathy explain the pleasure that we take, and must take, in the object of aesthetic experience? And how does the aesthetic of autonomy avoid the conclusion that all such pleasure is a violation of its strict requirement that we should be interested in the aesthetic object for its own sake alone? Neither theory seems to be equipped, as it stands, either to describe this pleasure or to show its place in the appreciation of art.